

Swamp Thing Film Festival

by Con Chapman

It has been roughly two years since Charles B. Pierce, the independent filmmaker whose “The Legend of Boggy Creek” became a cult hit, died at the age of 71. Wire service reports praised the seminal influence of Boggy Creek on “The Blair Witch Project,” but failed to note the more important aspect of Pierce’s ground-breaking work. Almost single-handedly, Pierce gave birth to a new film *genre*; call it Swamp Thing Cinema.



Charles B. Pierce, receiving an Arkansas arts award

At the impressionable age of 17, I left the rural county seat where I had grown up to attend college in the big city. There I learned almost immediately that movies weren’t just a convenient occasion to feel up a girl in the dark and, if she turned you down, to blow into your empty Milk Duds box and make a fart noise. No, they were “films,” a form of entertainment that, when molded by a master director—an *auteur*—could achieve the lofty status of art.



Eat Milk Duds, cover open end of box with mouth and blow.

At my college there were film societies for foreign films, contemporary films, documentary films—you name it. The people

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who ran these clubs tended to dress in black turtlenecks and wear berets—indoors! They talked about “tracking shots” and “jump cuts,” which I thought was a passing route run by a tight end. I was woefully behind in my knowledge of *le cinema*, but I got up to speed as fast as I could on the road to becoming a *cineaste*.



Truffaut's "Jules et Jim et le Thang du Swamp."

I boned up on Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard. I watched the films of Indian director Satyajit Ray. I saw Orson Welles play Harry Lime in *The Third Man*, before Welles got so big the phone company had to issue him his own area code.



Orson Welles: "I may not be fat now, but you watch—I will be someday."

At the end of the school year I would return to my home town to harvest fescue or haul ice or man the staple gun on a recreational vehicle assembly line. Believe it or not, I found it hard to squeeze my hard-earned knowledge of French “new wave” directors into the conversation when we'd go out to lunch for chicken fried steak.



Health warning: Do not eat garnish—it might be good for you.

The contrast between the two cultures in which I lived was striking—"decomboobulating" in the words of Bird Dog, a guy who pulled ice on the 2 to 10 shift at one of my summer jobs. How could one live with such cognitive dissonance, I asked myself. And then came the epiphany—*l'apercu*—that would henceforth shape my summer leisure time. Why not apply the finely-honed bull-shitting skills I had picked up hanging around with *avant garde* film fans to the Swamp Thing (or Thang) cinema that was flourishing all around me?



The Legend of Boggy Creek: The "Citizen Kane" of Swamp Thing cinema.

It isn't easy to just jump into the bog of Swamp Thing cinema. Like the early British films of Alfred Hitchcock, the prints have often deteriorated, and they are hard to find. Your local library or video store is unlikely to offer "The Legend of Boggy Creek," whose heart-stopping slumber party scene ranks right up there with the "Rosebud" shot at the end of Citizen Kane. A gaggle of high school girls assemble in a mobile home for an evening of popcorn, fudge and cootie catchers, and are dreamily discussing who has

cuter eyes, Joe Don or Gene Ray, when the hairy arm of the Boggy Creek monster busts through a window, spoiling all the fun, darn it!

But, you ask, what if my local college adult extension night school doesn't offer a "*Le Cinema du Swamp*" course. How will I ever be able to hold my own when somebody starts in with "I found the *denouement* of *The Swamp Thing Escapes* to be anti-climactic, and the jute-and-epoxy costume to be unconvincing"? Simple—take this quick and easy on-line Introduction to Swamp Thing Cinema! It's pass-fail—continuing education credit may be available for real estate brokers in some states.



Swamp thing en francais

The Swamp Thing Returns. *3 1/2 gators, one copperhead snake.* As every *aficionado* of *le cinema du swamp* knows, Swamp Things never die, they are merely injured and withdraw into the muck to lick their wounds. When they recover, they come back madder than ever. In this fine debut flick Roger Alan Nelson, who went on to direct *It Came From the Compost Heap*, lures you into the ultimate horror with a succession of increasingly larger victims, from a harmless baby chick to Fluffy, a miniature French poodle.

Bride of Swamp Thing. *4 gators.* Sandra Bernhardt steals the show in this romantic comedy that sends an important message: if abducted by a Swamp Thing from your cozy campsite, make the most of it. You may find love in the place where you least expect it—the arms of a 7 foot tall ape-like creature with day-old opossum on its breath.



Sandra Bernhardt: No make-up required.

Beauty and the Swamp Thing. *3 gators.* Nicolas Cage is “Unga,” a misunderstood swamp thing who is befriended by Mariah Carey after he picks a tick out of her hair.



“Can’t . . . get . . . tick head . . . out.”

A worthy effort from Jules Suomi, an NYU School of Film grad, but the plot is ultimately overpowered by the soundtrack, especially Marie Osmond's too-earnest “Swamp Thing's Love Theme.” The production numbers flag as the creatures from the lagoon flop their tails around a lackluster swamp daubed in mud, munga and smegma by set designer Otile Villa, giving the film a claustrophobic feel. I found myself wanting to hold my head under brackish swamp water

until the film died a natural death, or had its limbs torn off by Zorz, a large lizard-like creature that earned a Best Supporting Swamp Creature nomination for his performance.

